



New grassroots group pushes perinatal mental health onto the national policy agenda

BY TESSIE SANCI

The discourse on perinatal mental health mainly flowed in one direction during the 2019 federal election when the founders of a new advocacy group wrote to party leaders asking where they stood on a national strategy for the issue. Only NDP leader **Jagmeet Singh** (Burnaby South, B.C.) responded, saying he supported the idea.

Thanks to the **Canadian Perinatal Mental Health Collaborative's** (CPMHC) persistent and convincing efforts, the conversation has been a lot more lively in 2021, culminating in promises in both the Liberal and NDP platforms during the country's most recent trip to the polls.

Noting that the NDP has supported the group's work since it was founded in 2019, co-founder **Patricia Tomasi** said she and fellow co-founder, **Jaime Charlebois** were "pleasantly surprised" when they saw a reference to perinatal mental health in the Liberal platform. The now-governing party promised it would "work with partners to ensure timely access to perinatal mental health services."

"That's all we need to keep pushing this issue forward. Now, we're hoping to get on the mandate letter for the minister of health," Tomasi told Hill Times Research. Both she and Charlebois spoke during a virtual interview on Oct. 1.

The CPMHC was formed after Tomasi, then a journalist, and Charlebois, a registered nurse, collaborated on a news article about maternal mental health. Both were mothers who had experienced firsthand a perinatal mental health disorder. Charlebois said that the perinatal period is clinically defined as the time between the point of conception to at least one year after a person gives birth.

They realized that there was little public discussion on a sub-

ject which impacts up to 20 per cent of women, and 10 per cent of men, according to various studies.

When they couldn't find an advocacy group that specialized in the subject, they created one. Their first order of business was writing to the party leaders about their thoughts on a perinatal mental health strategy.

In a phone interview on Oct. 18, McPherson told Hill Times Research that her primary interest in the subject is the fact that she herself is a mother. She also appreciated the CPMHC founders' approach to advocacy, calling them "one of the best examples of advocacy" she encountered in her first term as an MP.

public, Charlebois said other perinatal mental health conditions include anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder, bipolar disorder, eating disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder.

There can be biological, psychological or sociological reasons for a person experiencing mental health issues during the perinatal period, according to Charlebois.

"People really only think, well, I have postpartum depression because I'm tired or my hormones were out of whack. Well, that is one factor, but the list of things that put somebody at risk is actually quite large," Charlebois said.

Charlebois's own experience was connected to medical complications she experienced after giving birth to her daughter 16 years ago. Gallbladder attacks and an overactive thyroid in addition to her daughter's inability to sleep through the night contributed to Charlebois experiencing a range of symptoms, including cycles of depression and obsessive compulsive disorder.

"It strips away your confidence, it takes away any ability to make decisions, or to have any cognitive processing ability. So, you're always questioning, am I doing the right thing? Am I good enough?" she said. "Those thoughts plague you through the whole period of the time when you're supposed to be attaching and bonding with your infant."

Charlebois added that as a nurse who specialized in the birthing process, she thought she was knowledgeable on perinatal issues, but realized there was a lack of focus on perinatal mental health in her own training. (Charlebois is now the regional perinatal mental health co-ordinator for the Simcoe and Muskoka regions in Ontario, where she oversees policy, training and education initiatives. She said she is the only one in



Patricia Tomasi and Jaime Charlebois started their advocacy efforts in 2019 to increase awareness of and support for perinatal mental health with a letter to federal party leaders, asking them for their opinion on a national strategy. Two years later, the subject has received attention in the House of Commons and was the basis of a policy promise in both the Liberal and NDP platforms for the 2021 election campaign. (Photo courtesy of the Canadian Perinatal Mental Health Collaborative)

From there, they began connecting with individual MPs. NDP MP **Heather McPherson** (Edmonton Strathcona, Alta.) was an early supporter who sponsored the CPMHC's petition in the House of Commons. That petition, tabled on May 12, 2020, called for a perinatal mental health strategy that would include universal screening and timely access to treatment for all women and men during pregnancy and the postpartum period. The petition received 612 signatures.

"They were really incredible, they used different tools, they used experts within the medical community, they used social media very well. I think they could teach some much better funded and much more experienced advocates a thing or two, that's for sure," McPherson said.

Beyond postpartum depression

Although postpartum depression is likely the most well-known disorder to the general



Canada who holds this type of position.)

Tomasi said she was diagnosed with postpartum bipolar disorder retroactively eight years after the birth of her first child. She said she experienced psychosis, and that she was only able to get an appointment with Women's College Hospital's reproductive life stages program in Toronto, due to her concern that her symptoms would return in perimenopause or menopause.

"I had the severe end of perinatal mental illness, and there were no treatments, there was no pathway available for me," Tomasi said. When she began experiencing symptoms again after the birth of her second child, she had already done her own research on perinatal mental health and said she had to tell her doctor which test to run on her.

Using facts to tell a story

Original research is a cornerstone of the CPMHC founders' approach to helping policymakers understand the importance of growing awareness and support in this area. Charlebois and Tomasi developed an online survey for health care practitioners that was reviewed by the University of Calgary's ethics board. The survey asked about screening and treatment practices for perinatal mental health and received responses from 435 professionals. The findings of the survey were reviewed by multiple doctors before the final report was released in May 2021.

The report states that 95.8 per cent of the surveyed health care professionals believe that perinatal mental health services are insufficient in Canada; and 87 per cent do not require screening for perinatal mental illness at their workplace.

NDP MP McPherson said she appreciated the founders' research on the ways other jurisdictions tackle perinatal mental health services.

One of the findings was that Canadian health care systems lack access to "mother and baby

units," which are in-patient psychiatric units where a parent can receive mental health care in a space that is separate from other patients receiving non-related mental health treatment. That arrangement allows the parent and their child to remain together while the parent receives care for their perinatal mental health disorder.

These units are popular in the United Kingdom and Australia, and are becoming available in the United States, according to Tomasi. She said that the development of these units, which can also be called a birthing person or parent and baby unit, would be one of the CPMHC's top recommendations to improve perinatal care in Canada.

The founders' outreach to MPs resulted in further acknowledgements of the issue in the House of Commons. McPherson tabled a motion in the House of Commons on May 5, 2021, calling on the federal government to develop a national perinatal mental health strategy. It received unanimous consent. NDP health critic **Don Davies** (Vancouver Kingsway, B.C.) followed that with his private member's bill, C-306, also calling for a perinatal mental health strategy. The bill was first read on June 3, but died on the order paper once the 2021 election was called.

Engaging Parliament 44-1

Tomasi and Charlebois are determined to continue the policy discussion on perinatal mental health. After incorporating their organization earlier this year, they registered to lobby public officials at the federal level.

"I think we've moved the needle in the last two years to the point where we were able to get it onto the Liberal platform and the NDP platform, that people ... doing policy understand that this is an important issue," Tomasi said. "We can see that in the conversations that we're having with MPs, political staff and non-political staff."

She added they want to be involved in the Liberal government's plans to create a mental health transfer to provinces and territories, which was a policy promise during the 2021 campaign.

Among the MPs they have in their corner are McPherson and Liberal MP **Pam Damoff** (Oakville North—Burlington, Ont.). Damoff wrote to Health Minister **Patty Hajdu** (Thunder Bay—Superior North, Ont.) in June 2021, indicating her support for a national perinatal mental health strategy and suggesting ways that some existing funding could be used to provide more support on the issue. For instance, Damoff wrote that Budget 2021 funding for community-based organizations focusing on sexual and reproductive health could be used in part to increase awareness of perinatal mental health.

Damoff told Hill Times Research by phone on Oct. 18, that she was motivated to write to Hajdu after meeting with Tomasi and Charlebois, who "made a very compelling case for the fact that this is an area of mental health where we're just not paying enough attention."

Damoff said that she suggested to her party that the Liberal platform include a promise on perinatal mental health. Although the platform did not indicate the Liberals would work on a strategy, Damoff said she believes it would be helpful to have one.

She said in the upcoming session, she plans to work with her colleagues "to see whether or not we're able to go further than what was in the platform. I don't know how far we're going to be able to go with that. [A strategy] wasn't in the platform ... but there are things that we can do and I'll continue to advocate on behalf of the Canadian Perinatal Mental Health Collaborative but also constituents."

The areas in which the federal government can contribute, according to Damoff, is through investments in targeted

health research and increasing awareness through public health campaigns.

"Sometimes when the federal government shows that leadership, it trickles down to other organizations and other levels of government to start raising that awareness," Damoff said.

McPherson said she has identified MPs across parties that are "keen" to work on this issue.

"I don't think there's an objection to a perinatal health strategy ... I just don't think that it's been given the profile or given the bandwidth, I guess, that it requires," McPherson said. "I think for us the next step is to bring some parliamentarians together from all parties to really push on this and really say, time's up, it's time to get this work done."

McPherson said that her sense is that the Liberals' promise to improve access to perinatal mental health services is not enough and a more formal initiative is required. As a party that holds the balance of power in a minority Parliament, she said the NDP's job is to ensure that the Liberals follow through on the promises that they've made to Canadians.

The CPMHC founders said they have also spoken with Conservative health critic **Michelle Rempel Garner** (Calgary Nose Hill, Alta.) and Conservative MP **Todd Doherty** (Cariboo—Prince George, B.C.), who acts as the party's adviser on mental health. Hill Times Research asked to interview Doherty on the subject, but his office said they were unable to accommodate the request.

"As the weeks go on, we will have more to add regarding this important issue. Obviously, we support the Canadian Perinatal Mental Health Collaborative and the work they are doing. In terms of policy specifics and initiatives, we will continue to consult with a variety of mental health organizations to identify gaps and determine where improvements need to be made," reads an emailed statement from Doherty's office sent on Oct. 18.